

Mountain lions are part of Tri-Valley environment

One early spring morning in 1999, a mountain lion was discovered within the fenced perimeter of the Laboratory. Around 7 a.m., as the early commute traffic began to file into the Laboratory, the cat made a determined move to leave the property along the west perimeter. This attempt placed the cat between Bldg. 132 north and the cross traffic on Mesquite Way. The lion followed its instincts that morning...

A similar story could have occurred in a multitude of places across the western states. More than half of the state of California is considered mountain lion habitat. Known as the largest true carnivore in the Golden State, and known in scientific circles as *Felis* or *Puma concolor*, this cat can weigh and measure in length as much as an average man. Its geographic range is two-pronged in shape. One prong extends along the coast from the Oregon border to Los Angeles; the other extends from the northern edge of the Sierras south to the Mexican border and beyond. This is an animal built for moving long distances, and can traverse 20 miles overnight if required. Male lions may have a home range of 100 square miles and the females' range is generally half that size. Numerous females may reside within one male lion's territory.

Historically, lions could afford to live in remote areas and subsist on the deer herds within their territory. Today, most Coastal and foothill areas of California are far from the remote settings of yesteryear. The deer numbers have diminished, and people/cat conflicts are on the rise. This trend should be expected to continue. Lions naturally want to avoid people and their elusive behavior demonstrates this predisposition. Yet, given the ever more developed landscape, mountain lions have fewer escape routes available to evade human encounters.

A scientific study by Professor Paul Beier (formerly of UC Berkeley) found that mountain lion attacks on humans have been exceedingly rare. In the U.S. and Canada from 1890 to 1990, only 10 human deaths were attributed to such attacks. The California Department of Fish and Game has carefully documented encounters



More than half of California is considered to be the mountain lion's habitat. This lion is known to be the largest true carnivore.

within the state and less than 16 injuries have been recorded during the last century.

Although prior to 1963, the State of California offered a bounty for each mountain lion killed in the state, the mountain lion is currently a "specially protected species" in California. Under California law it is only legal to harm or kill mountain lions in certain situations.

"The Department of Fish and Game may remove or take any mountain lion, or authorize an appropriate local agency with public safety responsibility to remove or take any mountain lion, that is perceived to be an imminent threat to public health or safety." The law also allows an individual, whose 'livestock or other property' that has been damaged or destroyed by a lion, to report the incident to Fish and Game and obtain a permit to dispatch the offending animal.

Mountain lions are formidable neighbors if encountered. What is the smart rule of thumb for a human that lives or works in cat country? Know the local food source. Assume lions are in your neighborhood if deer herds exist nearby. Follow the conduct guidance outlined by the state Fish and Game when you are enjoying the outdoors in mountain lion range. And know how to identify a lion if you see a cat.

What happened to that mountain lion sighted at LLNL in 1999?

With an advancing workforce arriving onsite that morning, the lion sought cover under the closest and only bush within several hundred yards and did not move for the next fourteen hours. At 9 p.m. that night, the animal moved offsite and was not seen again for some time. Of additional note, a smaller and younger lion, suffering from malnutrition, was euthanized a week later only a few miles to the south of LLNL.

California Department of Fish and Game estimates between 5,000-6,000 lions exist in the state today. Whether you are driving to work or enjoying the outdoors, recognize that you are sharing space with a powerfully independent animal; in this case, the mountain lion. And take the necessary precautions to protect yourself and your family. See this Website (<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/news/news04/04009.html>) for the rules of conduct that the Department of Fish and Game suggest are followed in mountain lion areas.

In light of the recent lion attacks in Southern California and the repeated mountain lion sightings at Sandia National Laboratory, it is critical that people be aware of their surroundings and that mountain lions may be present. As suggested in this article, mountain lions can be found in urban areas as well as wilderness areas.

LLNL/Sandia security and wildlife biologists strongly suggest that Lab employees avoid walking or jogging at Sandia until the situation is determined to be safe. Updates on lion sightings will continue to be posted in *Newsline* and/or *News Online*. Please report observations (location, time, activity level) of mountain lions to LLNL's wildlife biology program at "4-WILD" and Sandia Security at 294-2300.